

Chairman Tom Davis
Opening Statement
“Working Through an Outbreak: Pandemic Flu Planning and Continuity of Operations”
May 11, 2006

Good morning. Today, we have two very distinguished panels of witnesses here to discuss what health experts describe as one of the largest dangers facing our nation: the threat of pandemic flu.

We do not know when, or where, the next pandemic will strike. We do not know what strain of influenza will be the culprit – although much evidence points to avian flu. The virulent H5N1 strain has already caused 115 deaths in Southeast Asia, China, and the Middle East. Nor do we know if avian flu will turn out to be more like the swine flu – a pandemic that never materialized.

Regardless, we need to improve our readiness – because we can be sure that the next flu pandemic is a matter of when, not if. And when that time does come, the stakes will be enormous. Experts have projected that more than half a million Americans could die, over two million could be hospitalized, and 40 percent of the workforce would be unable to report to work in the event of a U.S. pandemic flu outbreak.

It is our responsibility to make sure America is prepared – not just prepared to address the massive public health implications of a pandemic, but prepared for the enormous economic and societal disruptions as well. Beyond efforts to protect human health, government agencies and private sector businesses must have the ability to maintain essential functions through an outbreak. Recent natural disasters and terrorist attacks raise questions about how the federal government will continue to operate during emergencies.

Last week, President Bush released the Administration’s Implementation Plan for its National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza. The plan designates the National Response Plan (NRP) as the primary mechanism to coordinate the federal government’s response. Under the NRP, the Department of Homeland Security is the lead agency to coordinate all federal activities. As seen during Hurricane Katrina, the NRP can be ambiguous, and individual authorities among agencies are not clearly defined. It is the Committee’s hope that lessons learned from Katrina are being applied to any deficiencies in the NRP so the country is more readily prepared for future disasters.

A key part of the government’s implementation plan is its emphasis on telework to ensure essential government operations can continue during a pandemic, when it may not be possible or advisable for employees to report to work and be in close quarters. Much to my frustration, the federal government has long lagged behind the private sector in promoting telework—despite the traffic, energy, cost, productivity, and employee morale benefits it can provide. I was pleased to see the pandemic implementation plan

require the Office of Personnel Management to develop guidance for federal departments on continuity of operations (COOP) planning criteria and telework to provide instructions for alternative workplace options during a pandemic.

This is an important step forward, and I am hopeful the pandemic implementation plan will spur the government to take serious strides in getting more employees to become teleworkers. I am also hopeful that this will help the federal government address several inadequacies in COOP planning, including deficient guidance to identify essential functions and ensure continued delivery of services during a crisis.

The government's implementation plan also acknowledges the limits of the federal government while highlighting the importance of preparedness by individuals, communities, and the private sector. I think all of us here today agree that our state and local health officials will be on the front lines of a pandemic response. It's our job to provide them with the adequate support and essential guidance they need to effectively prepare for and respond to a pandemic.

Our experience with last year's hurricane season is a sad reminder of the need for state and local authorities to be prepared for anything. Disasters, or pandemics, don't happen according to plan. Response requires agility, flexibility, and a willingness by leaders to take action when needed.

We have many important issues today to discuss within the context of pandemic flu. I look forward to a constructive dialogue with our witnesses on this life-and-death issue.